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INDIA: THE SIKH CHALLENGE

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Summary

Sikh discontent is the most serious domestic problem facing new Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. His decisions on the problem in the next few months will have a major impact not only on law and order nationwide and internal security in Punjab state--the Sikh homeland--but also on his electoral prospects and the course of New Delhi's relations with Islamabad. Rising Sikh-Hindu violence, the campaign against the government by extremist Sikhs, and growing public criticism compelled his mother to place Punjab state under Army control in June. Her death at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards reflected the outrage among even moderate Sikhs over the Army's assault on Sikh temples that had been used by extremists as both sanctuaries and arsenals.

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Hindu reprisals against Sikhs outside Punjab for Indira Gandhi's assassination have increased the likelihood of still more Sikh dissidence, separatism, and perhaps terrorism--despite the national government's massive counterinsurgency campaign in

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Punjab. The likely influx of refugees from neighboring states probably also will exacerbate Hindu-Sikh tension in the state. []

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To forestall renewed violence, Rajiv is likely to retain emergency security measures and the Army in Punjab for at least the next few months, even though the scope of its involvement there goes against the Army's apolitical grain. In the longer term, he will have to risk losing support among northern Hindus by trying to conciliate moderate Sikhs with an acceptable political settlement if he is to avoid being identified with his mother's pro-Hindu reputation. Otherwise, he may have to keep the reluctant Army in indefinite control of Punjab. []

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Rajiv has as yet not adopted his mother's pattern of seeking foreign as well as domestic scapegoats for the prolonged strife--and the resultant strains in New Delhi's relations with the United States and Pakistan. His reaction to the Moscow's disinformation campaign implicating Washington and Islamabad will shape his administration's ties with all three countries. He will in addition have to contend with Islamabad's fears that New Delhi has used the disturbances in Punjab as an excuse to deploy military forces there unrelated to the Army's internal security mission--a concern that we share. []

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In recent years, rising sectarian tension throughout India has posed a growing challenge to New Delhi, but the intensity of regional and religious concerns among Sikhs in a key border state will make their discontent Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's most difficult domestic problem. The Sikhs--a minority in India but a majority in Punjab--have long sought to stave off political, religious, and social assimilation by the growing Hindu population in the state. Since 1981, moderate Sikh leaders associated with the Akali Dal Party have directed their efforts at trying to secure greater regional autonomy for Punjab state, their homeland, and special religious concessions for their coreligionists there. Their demands, however, were ignored because the government wanted to avoid making special religious or political concessions to the Sikhs that would set off a chain of similar demands from other regional and religious leaders around the country. []

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Radical religious revivalists, however, outflanked the moderates--and are likely to increase their sway among Sikhs still more in the wake of the recent Hindu attacks on Sikhs. In our view New Delhi's repeated delays of promised negotiations helped discredit moderates who favored a negotiated settlement and fueled the rise of extremists. The extremists have built their following among young Sikhs on an anti-government, anti-Hindu stance and are associated also with the movement for a separate Sikh nation. The new religious dimension of the Sikh

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agitation in our view has polarized many Sikhs against the "Hindu" national government and dimmed prospects for a political resolution of regional demands. [REDACTED]

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India's 15 million Sikhs--about 2 percent of the national population--are disciples of their ten "gurus" (teachers), beginning in the fifteenth century with founder Guru Nanak and ending with Gobind Singh, who died in 1708. Nanak preached an austere monotheism that discarded the fatalism, caste system, and worship of idols associated with Hinduism, as well as the intolerance and fanaticism of the then-dominant Muslim ruling class. [REDACTED]

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Nanak's successors shaped his following into a social and religious community with its own institutions and conventions, including commitment to the wearing of hair and beard unshorn. Unlike Indian Muslims and Christians, the Sikhs are not treated as a separate religious community in the Indian constitution. Most Sikhs have maintained close ties with the majority Hindus, including frequent intermarriage, but relations between the two religious groups have been severely strained by the recent sectarian violence. [REDACTED]

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Military Crackdown: Asserting National Authority, Cutting Political Losses

Indira Gandhi's decision to send in the Army against Sikh militants in Punjab last May was an admission that her political strategy to defuse the crisis had failed and that she was willing to take real risks now to quell the three-year-old disturbances. The paramilitary troops she had sent earlier had failed to bring the well-armed extremists to heel. Her initial reluctance to deploy regular troops probably resulted from both the Army's aversion to involvement in internal security duties and her concern over how the large number of Sikhs in the service--about 10 percent of troops and 20-30 percent of the officer corps--would react. [REDACTED]

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Several security-related considerations probably impelled Gandhi to send in the Army:

- She likely decided that the stepped-up terrorism by Sikhs and their threat to blockade vital grain shipments from Punjab posed an intolerable threat.
- She feared that separatism was gaining ground among the Sikh majority in Punjab [REDACTED]
- She may have believed that Pakistan was preparing to take advantage of the turmoil in Indian Punjab to seize territories in northern India. [REDACTED]

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Gandhi probably hoped also that her crackdown would undo some of the damage to her political standing that had resulted from mounting religious violence elsewhere in the country. According to Indian political analysts, she wanted to show the

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majority Hindus, whose votes she sought, that she was willing and able to assert government authority even at the cost of alienating an important religious minority. Many Hindus believe she has been too generous with minorities and too tolerant of their demands and demonstrations. [REDACTED]

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In our view, the scope of New Delhi's security initiatives in Punjab made clear Gandhi's determination to eradicate Sikh dissidence. Beginning in late May, the government:

- Placed Punjab under Army control, imposed a news blackout, and initially, banned travel to and from the state.
- Expanded the government's national security powers--enabling it, for example, to set up in Punjab and other disturbed states special courts for the trial of dissidents.
- Ordered military actions against some 40 Sikh temples believed to serve as sanctuaries and arsenals for extremists--including the sacred Golden Temple in Amritsar.
- Authorized the arrest of an estimated 5,000 suspected Sikh dissidents, including moderate leaders. New Delhi's White Paper on Punjab blamed the success of the extremists in part on acquiescence by the moderates.
- Announced that it would deal severely with Sikh soldiers who had rebelled against their officers in several parts of the country, apparently in response to rumors of atrocities against Sikh civilians by security forces in Punjab. [REDACTED]

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The unrest in Punjab in our view also provided Gandhi with a justification for augmenting her military forces in a critical border state. We estimate that between mid-May and mid-June, the Army deployed 20,000-25,000 troops to Punjab from adjoining regional commands to reinforce the more than 100,000 Army personnel already there. [REDACTED]

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More Sikh Dissidence Likely

In our judgment, Sikh alienation from the government in the wake of the crackdown in Punjab--and now, the Hindu attacks on Sikhs outside Punjab--will result in long-term resistance to New Delhi's policies. A poll conducted by a respected Indian publication in early July in four major cities outside Punjab revealed that 55 percent of the Sikhs--compared with only 6 percent of Hindu respondents--considered the Army assault on the

Golden Temple unjustified. Forty-two percent of the Sikhs, but only 11 percent of the Hindus, believed that Sikhs should protest in response. []

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Anger among Sikhs over the military action in Punjab so far has been directed principally against New Delhi--culminating in the assassination of Indira Gandhi--but we believe Sikh outrage still could rekindle violence against Hindus in the state, particularly in light of Hindu violence against Sikhs since the assassination. According to press reports, Sikhs at home and abroad since June had demonstrated, attacked Indian Government property, and in some instances, publicly threatened to assassinate senior Indian officials. In Jammu-Kashmir, some Sikhs retaliated against Hindu shrines as well as government installations for the alleged pro-Hindu bias of Indira Gandhi's policy in Punjab. []

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We believe that Rajiv will find it difficult to conciliate moderate Sikhs without evoking a backlash from militants claiming the mantle of the late extremist leader, Bhindranwale. Young extremists foiled Indira Gandhi's efforts in late September to stem growing Sikh unity against her government by removing troops from the Golden Temple, according to press reports. The militants took over the temple and raised the separatist banner of Khalistan, forcing the government to send paramilitary forces into the temple. In our view the incident presages the emergence of a new militant Sikh leadership that will complicate eventual efforts by moderate Sikh spokesmen--such as former member of parliament Amarinder Singh--to reestablish a dialogue with New Delhi. []

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Rajiv: Limited Leeway for Policy Changes

We judge that Rajiv Gandhi faces an unpalatable choice between retaining extraordinary security measures in Punjab to prevent an upsurge of violence before the national election due to be held by the end of January, and attempting--with little likelihood of success--to conciliate an angry minority group whose dissidence poses a long-term challenge to stability in a key border state. Rajiv may decide for several reasons--as his mother apparently had--to delay attempts at negotiations with moderate Sikhs until at least after elections:

- Anger among Hindus in the Hindi-speaking northern states over his mother's assassination probably will make him reluctant to offer concessions to the Sikhs publicly lest he lose Hindu votes.
- He may believe--as we do--that Sikh leaders would be unwilling at this time to risk losing the support of their coreligionists by accepting a compromise with the government.
- He probably has already written off Sikh votes and may therefore believe he has little to lose by postponing a response to Sikh concerns until after the election. Rajiv may choose--as his mother did in the past--to hold secret discussions with some moderate Sikh leaders,

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including those still in detention, in an effort to pave the way for future negotiations. []

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Sporadic terrorist incidents are likely to recur and will continue to embarrass the government and cause concern for the safety of government officials--particularly Rajiv Gandhi and President Zail Singh. The assassination will likely compel the government to step up security still more and restrict the public activities of targeted persons. Sikh dissidents also have hijacked Indian airliners twice in the past three months. Since June, militants have breached the walls of major canals in Punjab, damaged railway tracks, roads, and buildings, and assassinated several government supporters and officials, according to press reports. []

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Punjab and the National Election

Sikh discontent could affect both the timing and the outcome of the national election, which is to be held before February. Rajiv probably would prefer to proceed with elections in January to capitalize on the current groundswell of sympathy. He could, however, be forced to postpone them because of growing sectarian violence as well as disorganization in his Congress Party's election campaign. He could do so by using a constitutional loophole that would permit him to extend the life of the lower house of parliament by six months or by declaring a state of emergency. []

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Even if Rajiv does not postpone elections nationally, he may decide to delay voting in Punjab to avoid violence. Postponing the parliamentary elections in one or two states would not invalidate the results of voting elsewhere, but a close contest could raise questions about which party will lead the nation after voting takes place in the states where it was delayed. []

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Punjab has in our view already contributed to shifts of allegiance among religious minorities--Muslims as well as Sikhs--that may endanger the Congress Party's hold on power. In recent months, the perception that his mother was biased in favor of Hindus has cost the party support among Muslims as well as Sikhs, clouding electoral prospects in some constituencies, according to reliable observers. []

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Rajiv probably already has written off Sikh votes in the coming national election. He may lose several parliamentary seats as a result, but the impact of changing Sikh allegiances on state politics is likely to be even more significant, according to political observers. Indian press reports indicate that growing Sikh chauvinism is eroding the Sikh support that has kept the Congress Party in power in Punjab for 15 of the last 18 years. Sikh votes could sweep the Akali Dal or a coalition of the national government's efforts to end dissidence in Punjab. []

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Sympathy for Rajiv may not gain him enough new support to offset likely losses among Sikhs and Muslims. Staunch northern Hindus may see Rajiv's efforts to protect Sikhs from further

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reprisals as a rejection of his mother's appeals to Hindu voters over the past year. Any moves toward reducing sectarian tensions by conciliating moderate Sikhs also will, in our judgment, risk losing Hindu votes. [redacted]

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The Pakistan Factor

Rajiv inherits a government whose publicly expressed suspicions of Pakistani support for militant Sikhs have strained relations with Islamabad. Senior officials have publicly claimed to have irrefutable evidence of Sikh extremist training camps in Pakistan--although they have not produced this evidence. [redacted]

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Despite the Indian charges, we do not believe the Pakistan Government has provided training to Sikh militants--in part because Pakistan fears that New Delhi might retaliate militarily. Officials of the World Sikh Organization told US diplomats in Bombay late last summer that even when representatives of their organization asked Pakistan's President Zia for assurances of asylum, citizenship, and property rights for Sikh refugees, he merely advised them to avoid antagonizing Hindus. [redacted]

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[redacted] Pakistani officials, for their part, have indicated to US diplomats their concern that since June, the Indians have used the unrest in Punjab as cover for a substantial buildup there of forces and weapons unrelated to internal security requirements or efforts to seal the border with Pakistan--a concern we believe is justified. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States

The direction of Rajiv's foreign policy remains unclear, but if he blames India's domestic problems on outsiders--as his mother did--Sikh unrest will continue to create problems in US-Indian relations. Indira Gandhi repeatedly charged that support from Sikhs living in the United States, as well as Canada, the United Kingdom, and West Germany, was responsible for the growth of Sikh separatism. She also publicly implied possible US intelligence involvement with Sikh dissidents, although she backed off when pressed by journalists to clarify her statements. [redacted]

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Rajiv may choose to dissociate himself from reports carried in the English-language Indian press implicating Washington in his mother's assassination. The reports in our view replay Soviet disinformation, which also has alleged joint involvement by Washington and Islamabad in Punjab. [redacted] privately acknowledged several months ago that New Delhi had no evidence of US complicity, and New Delhi's July "White Paper" on Punjab avoided naming the foreign countries alleged to have aided Sikh dissidents. [redacted]

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